

The Great Sandy National Park and Great Sandy Biosphere

With its endless stretches of white sand, deserted beaches, abundant birdlife and picture-perfect sunrises – the Great Sandy National Park is one of the many reasons that nature-lovers visit the Sunshine Coast.

The park is divided into two areas: the Cooloola section, which covers 18,400 hectares and is located between Noosa Heads in the south and Rainbow Beach in the north; and the Fraser Island section, situated north of Rainbow Beach, covering 56,000 hectares (140,000 acres) including the World Heritage Listed Fraser Island.

The region has been given official Biosphere status due to its unique environmental features and diversity. The Great Sandy Biosphere is home to:

- more marine diversity than the entire Great Barrier Reef
- the world's tallest and most complex rainforests growing in sand
- almost half of all Australia's bird species
- breeding sites for endangered marine turtles
- the oldest and largest unconsolidated sand mass in the world
- 7558 recorded species of flora and fauna
- the best observable ancient dune chronological sequencing
- a declared dugong sanctuary
- internationally recognised feeding grounds for migratory birds (RAMSAR wetland status)
- critical habitat for rare and endangered species
- waters where humpback whales dwell during their annual southern migration
- the world's largest and highest perched dune lakes

Landscape

Over the past two million years, ocean currents and waves have swept sand north from the continental shelf of New South Wales and southern Queensland. This sand has accumulated over the bedrock, parallel to the coast. Onshore winds have blown some of the loose sand inland, forming sequences of overlapping dunes. The Great Sandy National Park features at least eight of these ancient overlapping dune systems.

One of the most spectacular things about this section of coastline is the multi-coloured rocks and sand which have been created by iron-rich minerals in the dunes which, over thousands of years, have stained the sand into a variety of shades of yellow, red, orange and brown.

Carlo Sandblow

Sandblows form when strong onshore winds break through the vegetation and carry sand across the land from eroding dunes. The force is so powerful that it has the ability to engulf forests. The result is a landscape that has been likened to the surface of the moon – desolate and beautiful. The best place to

witness this powerful force of nature on the Sunshine Coast is at Carlo Sandblow which can be accessed by driving to the reservoir at the top of Cooloola Drive and then walking 600 metres. From this sandscape you will discover breathtaking views of Double Island Point, Tin Can Bay and the Coloured Sands. Many visitors like to take a piece of cardboard or boogie board and slide down the dune slopes. It's also a spot where you can watch hang gliders hover over the ocean.

Birdlife

The Great Sandy National Park is officially recognised as among the most important roosting sites for migratory shorebirds in Australia. It's estimated that at least 40,000 birds choose the wetlands of the Great Sandy Strait as their summer feeding grounds, coming from as far away as Alaska and Siberia. The area is also of importance for yearling birds, especially Eastern Curlews, which do not return to the northern hemisphere until the following year. BirdLife International has listed the region as an 'Important Bird Area' due to its large population of Black-Breasted Button-Quails as well as many Stone-Curlews, Green Catbirds, Regent Bowerbirds, Mangrove Honeyeaters and Pale-yellow Robins. The rare Eastern Ground Parrot is also found in the area – as is one of the last coastal populations of the Emu.

Wildlife

The Cooloola section of the Great Sandy National Park covers extensive areas of open wallum heathland, crystal clear freshwater lakes, towering sand dunes and sections of mangrove-lined fish habitats at the Tin Can Bay inlet. For this reason it's a mecca for wildlife including wallabies, possums, sugar gliders, flying foxes, acid frogs and various species of lizards and snakes.

The Great Beach Drive

The Sunshine Coast is home to a one of the best beach-stretches for four-wheel-driving in south-east Queensland. The Noosa North Shore is located south of Rainbow Beach in the Cooloola section of the Great Sandy National Park and is an ideal place for camping, fishing, swimming and getting away from it all. There's over 100 miles of beach driving on offer in this special part of the Sunshine Coast.

The North Shore is accessed by car ferry from Tewantin and vehicle permits are required for certain sections. Places of interest that can be explored in a 4WD include Rainbow Beach, Harry's Hut, Cooloola National Park, Teewah Beach, Inskip Point and the popular surf spot – Double Island Point.

For more information visit: www.visitsunshinecoast.com.au